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Can you see what I see? Differing perspectives between low and micro-budget filmmakers and film development agencies

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Abstract

Low and micro-budget filmmaking is less documented than mainstream cinema, and as such, less understood. There is a need for more research into all aspects of low and micro-budget cinema, as it is often the portal through which some filmmakers will pass on the way to bigger things. This paper uses a comparative literature approach to explore two texts from different perspectives of low and micro-budget filmmaking; John Connors' acceptance speech for Best Actor at the Irish Film and Television Academy Awards in 2018, and the UK Film Council's 'Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK' report from 2008. The aim is to understand: is there a different perspective between the low and micro-budget filmmaker and the state development agency that seeks to support filmmaking? The conclusion identifies some differences in perspective and argues that it is due to a lack of understanding about each party that creates the friction.

Keywords: Low and micro-budget; Film production; Production studies; Film policy; Film Development Agency; John Francis Connors 1990- ; UK Film Council; Bord Scannán na hÉireann; Irish Film Board; Fís Éireann; Screen Ireland

Introduction

John Connors gave an acceptance speech after he won the award for Best Actor at the Irish Film and Television Academy Awards on 17 February 2018 for his role as Jason Connelly in *Cardboard Gangsters*.¹ The speech went viral² on social media and mainstream news channels in the UK, such as Channel 4 News and the Guardian website. The speech highlighted the differing values between himself and the Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board (now Fís Éireann/ Screen Ireland). The speech came ten years after the UK Film Council (UKFC)

¹ John Connors, dir., *Cardboard Gangsters*, Dublin, Ireland: Five Knight Films/Stalker Films 2017.

² Nathan Griffin, 'John Connors' IFTA Acceptance Speech Watched Over 1 Million Times On Channel 4 Facebook', *The Irish Film & Television Network*. Accessed April 15, 2020.
<http://www.iftn.ie/news/?act1=record&only=1&aid=73&rid=4291518&tpl=archnews&force=1>

published their report into *Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK*,³ which purported ‘to provide an accurate account of this part of the film production sector. The evidence... obtained provides the first ever comprehensive picture of low and micro budget filmmaking in the UK.’⁴ It is possible to compare these two sources to explore the themes within each and the differences between them. The purpose is not to analyse John Connors's specific case and whether the Irish Film Board were right or wrong in their funding decision. The aim is to understand: is there a difference in perspective between the low and micro-budget filmmaker and the state development agency that seeks to support filmmaking?

Rationale

What would be the grounds for such a comparison when the report refers to the UK in 2008 and the speech was made in Ireland in 2018? First, the two countries have a history of strong connections linking their production sectors and both countries have established development agencies to support their film industries in a creative sector dominated by the United States. Second, Connors's viral speech made news in the UK mainstream media, which also provides grounds for comparison. Third, both data sources are insights into low and micro-budget film production, an area of filmmaking that gets less critical attention than mainstream filmmaking. Fourth, they are different perspectives on filmmaking, and deserve comparison.

The first and second grounds are relevant but not rigorous. Film policy differs between Ireland and the United Kingdom, with differing approaches and priorities. The UK Film Council was dissolved in 2011 and had no like-for-like replacement. UK film development is now divided between various regional screen agencies and the British Film Institute. Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board had a change of board in 2017 and rebranded in 2018 as Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland. This paper does not seek to view the different development agencies as interchangeable, identical institutions. However, they previously shared similar approaches to developing low and micro-budget films through schemes such as iFeatures and Microwave (in the UK) and Catalyst (in Ireland). The film development agencies have also shared many of the same concerns as each other in an industry dominated by the United States.

To be clear, John Connors would not have appeared in the UKFC report even if he had made the film ten years earlier, as it was an Irish film and outside of the UKFC remit. Had it been made ten years earlier and in the UK, it would have qualified under their definition of micro-budget production. Relevant, but not rigorous: the UK media interest suggests there is a relevance to the speech, but Connors's speech may have been of interest due to any number of variables, including the content, the virality, and the fact that the film was popular. It is unlikely that his speech was of specific interest because of a differing perspective from the UKFC report.

It is the third and fourth grounds for comparison that are most important and establish the validity of this paper. Although Matthew Freeman identifies recent growth in academic production studies exploring topics that impact on how media products are produced,⁵ low and micro-budget filmmaking has largely been overlooked. Low and micro-budget filmmaking is amorphous inasmuch as it does not occur in fixed studios, participants may not even *work* as filmmakers (but engage as amateurs), and production roles may not be fixed. Bigger budget productions are more visible; finance deals appear in trade papers, pre-production details are

³ Sarah Beinart, Chris Chandler, Laura Hypponen, Mike Kelly, and Catherine O'Shea, *Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK: a research report produced for the UK Film Council*. Woking, England: Northern Alliance Consultancy, 2008

⁴ *ibid*, 2

⁵ Matthew Freeman, *Industrial Approaches to Media: a Methodological Gateway to Industry Studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

often publicized, streets are sealed off for filming, star buses arrive with catering trucks. Low and micro-budget production is more difficult to track in every sense: tiny crews with smaller equipment producing work that audiences may never see. It was this nebulous nature of low and micro-budget filmmaking which led the UKFC to initiate their investigation in 2008 in the first place. The report remains the only meaningful investigation into low and micro-budget filmmaking by a film development agency in the UK and Ireland.

Most research into films focuses on the work which is more visible. Low and micro-budget filmmaking is a career phase that some filmmakers may have to pass through to reach bigger work, while others may never move beyond it. It therefore requires wider consideration to understand its nature. The UKFC agreed with the need for better understanding and believed their final report suggested an ‘accurate account’ and ‘comprehensive picture’ of low and micro-budget film production. Part of their mixed methodological approach was a survey of producers of low and micro-budget films. While acknowledging that ‘the precise motivations of filmmakers are individual and various’,⁶ they established three generic categories based on analytical and subjective criteria:

- low or micro-budget filmmakers with very precise and well-defined ambitions and a business model which is well-constructed and evidence-based.
- filmmakers that enter production with a less well-formed understanding of the filmmaking environment, or with less experience who regard the process as a learning experience, and value outcomes in terms of knowledge gained and lessons learned.
- filmmakers who consider themselves unsupported or oppositional to the mainstream industry and the network of strategic agencies in the UK, feeling that industry structures and strategic agency interventions are constructed in such a way as to deny opportunity and block talent.

These contributions were made to Northern Alliance, a media consultancy representing the UKFC, and are presented in summarised form. The primary data from the interviews are not publicly available. Connors's speech is a therefore a rare occasion, providing an individual perspective on low and micro-budget filmmaking. It is unusual for filmmakers to *publicly* speak out against film development agencies in case it damages their chances of future support (or at least attract public interest when speaking out.) This rarity does not diminish the grounds for comparison; Connors is not alone in his criticism, only rare in the public nature of it. The UKFC report acknowledged that some contributors had been critical of their policies when interviewed, yet attributed it to filmmakers feeling unsupported. Connors would fit such a description were a similar report to be written today in Ireland. However, there is currently little indication of a plan to conduct a similar report in either the UK or Ireland at this point in time. Therefore, despite the variance in time and location, it is the rarity of these contrasting perspectives that provides the grounds for comparison.

Methodology

This paper examines Connors's speech and compares/contrasts it with the UKFC report, using a comparative literature analysis approach, treating Connors's acceptance speech and the UKFC report as individual texts. Connors's speech is compared line by line⁷ to the contents of the UKFC report and analysed for similarities and differences. This approach is consistent with

⁶ Beinart, Chandler, Hypponen, Kelly, and O'Shea, ‘Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK’, 21.

⁷ IFTA Awards [IFTA Award Youtube channel]. ‘IFTA18 Best Actor Award winner John Connors’, 17 Feb 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8DkSIL9k-Y>.

Mayer et al. and Freeman, who encourage production studies to draw upon a mixture of methodological framework from other disciplines.^{8 9}

An obvious methodological concern is interpreting the specificity of one person's perspective (Connors) and assigning it to a general group of people (all low and micro-budget filmmakers). To combat this, the analysis will be followed by a discussion that tries to establish themes that can be corroborated with evidence elsewhere, either in the UKFC report or wider literature.

The UKFC's way of addressing this concern was to increase the sample size and generalise from apparent trends, which led to their taxonomy of three groups derived from the contributors. However, the report omitted any information about how the data analysis was conducted. This would have been useful, because it would have indicated whether the researchers went looking for existing themes or searched for emerging themes within the responses (or both). Without such information, it is difficult to determine whether the data has been cherry-picked to reinforce an existing perception of circumstances. Similarly, the UKFC report did not examine the positionality of the media consultants who conducted the research, whether any researcher bias was possible, or whether contributors' responses were coloured as a result.

Analysis

‘Relax, relax, relax, I didn’t save the world.’

Connors's speech begins with this self-deprecating statement as the applause for his win subsides. The statement suggests that Connors wants to place some perspective on the occasion and immediately indicates a different set of values than are being celebrated at the ceremony. He has won an award, which he will later say is not important to him. By belittling his achievement, he is belittling the status of the achievement too. ‘I didn't save the world’ indicates his belief that there are wider social problems that still need fixing, which he will come to later in his speech.

‘Me doctor told me not to drink tonight. What do doctors know, huh?’

There are two interesting components to this part of the speech. First, the acknowledgment that he has had an alcoholic drink, and second, the questioning of expertise.

John Connors may have referred to the alcohol as a get-out-clause for any controversy caused, but he does not appear drunk and his speech is clear and his thought lucid. Acknowledging the drink on stage means that it is socially acceptable that he is drinking, which is something unexplored within the UKFC report. Why is this so? It is possible to look at the tables of the IFTA awards ceremony and see plenty of drinks, similar to most film award ceremonies. In public photo albums of major British cinema events such as the Edinburgh Film Festival, it is possible to see the prevalence of alcohol, especially at sponsored receptions and networking nights,¹⁰ which suggests there is a drinking culture in the UK and Irish film industries. So why is the drinking culture not represented in the UKFC report? Are award ceremonies, receptions and networking nights unusual, or is it a recent phenomenon? It is

⁸ Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John Thornton Caldwell. *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

⁹ Freeman, *Industrial Approaches to Media*.

¹⁰ Edinburgh International Film Festival, ‘UK Film Council Short Filmmakers Drinks 25th June 2009’ [photo album]. Flickr Commons Photostream. Accessed 16 April 2020, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/edfilmfest/albums/72157620442683697>.

interesting to note that Shooting People, an online independent filmmaking community, hold regular events on the first Monday of every month in 19 cities across the UK (and one in New York City, USA) and call the event ‘Shooters in the Pub’. The UKFC report made no mention of this organization or events, despite Shooting People having been established in 1998, with over 35000 members.¹⁰ The UKFC report lacked specificity in relation to where production activity takes place in low and microbudget filmmaking, which suggests that it was either assumed or not considered. It would have been interesting to understand where the UKFC envisaged activities like networking or production meetings taking place, because some locations may not be as encouraging of diversity as may be wished (e.g., people who may not drink alcohol for whatever reason may wish to avoid situations where alcohol is present).

Similar to his first line about saving the world, Connors's point about doctors is a foreshadowing of the sentiment to come with regards to the Irish Film Board. His speech evokes Marshall McLuhan's argument that experts follow the ground rules of their environment, while the amateur is unencumbered by the prevailing paradigm and can think outside of the box.¹¹ While this analysis may seem like an over-intellectualisation of a throw-away comment, it is certainly the theme of what is to come in his speech. The UKFC does not refer to doctors or experts in the body of its report, but it is written by a media consultancy firm, and contains interviews with industry experts. Therefore, it could be considered to be looking at low and micro-budget filmmaking from an ‘industry expert’ perspective.

‘First of all, I want to thank the Academy, thank you very much, you're deadly. I want to thank Mark O'Connor, my brother-in-arms who gave me my first shot at acting. Richie Bolger, our producer, the film could not have been made without him. All cast and crew, too many to name. My family, the best family in the world.’

This part of Connors's speech is standard fare when accepting awards. The occasion is usually taken as a chance to thank those who have helped along the way. Connors cites his family in his acceptance, referring to both his actual biological family and his perceived family (his unrelated brother-in-arms). It becomes clear later in the speech how important they are to him. Interestingly, the UKFC makes no meaningful reference to filmmaking in relation to families or friendships at all. There have been subsequent studies that explore the impact that filmmaking has on familial life in terms of insecurity and uncertainty.^{12,13} This perspective is completely absent from the UKFC report despite the fact that it may be accentuated in low and micro-budget filmmaking, where budgets may place extra pressure on circumstances. Perhaps families would have been explored in more detail had the report been written slightly later, especially as crowdfunding was nascent at the time and was not mentioned. This is a clear and obvious way in which filmmakers are supported by their relationships. The UKFC report also contains no examination as to how social interactions work within low and micro-budget filmmaking aside from the one reference about ‘friends’ getting together to make a film.¹⁴ In fact, the report pays little attention to social interactions within *any* strata of filmmaking, such

¹⁰ Shooting People, ‘UK Film Courses : About’. Accessed 16 April 2020, <https://shootingpeople.org/training/about>.

¹¹ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium Is the Massage: Co-Ordinated by Jerome Angel*. New York, London, Toronto: Bantam Books, 1967.

¹² Irena Grugulis and Dimitrinka Stoyanova, ‘Social Capital and Networks in Film and TV: Jobs for the Boys?’, *Organization Studies* 33, no. 10 (August 2012): 1311–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612453525>.

¹³ Lorraine Rowlands and Jocelyn Handy, ‘An Addictive Environment: New Zealand Film Production Workers' Subjective Experiences of Project-Based Labour’, *Human Relations* 65, no. 5 (April 2012): 657–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711431494>.

¹⁴ Beinart, Chandler, Hypponen, Kelly, and O'Shea, ‘Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK’, 53.

as how creative relationships work or the value of reputation. There are only three occasions where the word ‘relationship’ is used in the report and only once is it in the context of their value to filmmaking, referring to Warp X’s lasting relationships with sales agents and other industry sectors.¹⁵ The lack of emphasis on relationships is disappointing as there is plenty of literature pre-dating the UKFC report indicating how fundamental relationships are to the structure of the filmmaking industries.^{16,17,18,19} Perhaps it was the existing literature, or an assumption that it was common knowledge, that meant the UKFC missed the opportunity to identify how relationships operate *specifically* in low and micro-budget filmmaking.

There is one similarity in this section between Connors’s speech and the UKFC report. He acknowledges his writer/director and producer by name but thanks the crew collectively, presumably for the sake of time. The UKFC took a similar approach to their data collection; only asking writers, directors and producers of low and micro-budget features to contribute to the report. The thoughts of the crew remain unarticulated.

‘Er, who else? Our funders Egg Post-production, let me get this right, Filmbase, TV3, BAI and the Film Board. Oh wait, the Film Board didn’t fund us. They turned us down. What was it? Oh wait, they didn’t understand our approach.’

Connors uses comic timing to deliver the criticism to the Film Board. He initially includes them on the list of funders, presumably because they appear in most people’s acceptance speeches, before calling them out for turning the project down. The purpose of this paper is not to determine whether the rejection was reasonable or not. The text implies that an application for funding was made and was turned down on the basis that ‘they didn’t understand our approach’. Connors’s speech has the same adversarial tone that appears in the UKFC report from those that are rejected. ‘They’ and ‘us’ suggests a division between the filmmaker and the development agency. It could be ‘we couldn’t agree an approach’ or ‘they didn’t fund the film’. The rejection is interpreted as *personal*, although it is likely that the film that was turned down, not the filmmakers. This is what makes Connors’s speech so rare, because other filmmakers may cling to the idea that their next film *may* get funding, so keep their thoughts and opinions to themselves. It would be interesting to examine this rejection process in closer detail to see why this gap in perception exists between the filmmaker and film development agency. The Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland website suggests that a project can be resubmitted once after rejection but only with significant and material changes, but it is unclear how these are negotiated.²⁰ What further support is there following rejection? Are there ways to support and encourage such people so that they may be successfully funded in future? It is difficult to identify any existing initiatives advertised in the UK or Ireland, yet these may prevent those who are rejected from taking the news so personally.

¹⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁶ Helen Blair, ‘You’re Only as Good as Your Last Job: The Labour Process and Labour Market in the British Film Industry’, *Work, Employment and Society* 15, no. 1 (2001): 149–69.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170122118814>.

¹⁷ Chris Menger, ‘Artistic Labor Markets and Careers’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 541–74.

¹⁸ Ken Starkey, Christopher Barnatt, and Sue Tempest, ‘Beyond Networks and Hierarchies: Latent Organizations in the U.K. Television Industry’, *Organization Science* 11, no. 3 (2000): 299–305.
<https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.11.3.299.12500>.

¹⁹ Beth Bechky, ‘Gaffers, Gofers and Grips: Role-Based Coordination in Temporary Organizations’, *Organizational Science* 17, no. 1 (n.d.): 3–21.

²⁰ Screen Ireland, *Production Funding Guidelines*, 2020,
https://www.screenireland.ie/images/uploads/general/Production_Funding_Guidelines_2020_Updated_24.02.2020.pdf.

What is apparent, in the UKFC report, is the terminology used by the ‘experts’ when discussing the potential of the films they see. There is evidence within the Low and Micro-Budget Filmmaking report of the UK Film Council trying to quantify and measure ‘cultural value’. In the second paragraph of the Executive Summary it is acknowledged that ‘it is difficult to assess objectively the cultural contribution of UK low and micro-budget film’,²¹ then identifies how some films have won awards at prominent festivals, which is labelled ‘culturally significant’.²² This is a contentious term that requires more context; by what parameters are films considered culturally significant or not? Whose culture are we talking about?

‘Well, we kinda had an interesting approach, winning awards all across the globe and being the biggest box-office hit of the year, not that it matters to me, but it matters to you and you can’t take credit for that.’

Connors delivers his punch line to the earlier comment. His speech still does not articulate what the ‘approach’ refers to, but it suggests that film development agencies have a particular methodology in mind when developing films, and that the filmmakers should align with it. He points out to the accolades that the film has garnered and how these are the things that the Film Board consider to be important, similar to the ‘cultural significance’ that the UKFC were looking for.

The comment seems intended to shame; a humiliation over wrong decisions. Switching the speech from ‘they’ to ‘you’ indicates a direct address to particular people in the room. The comment could be interpreted as vindictive, were he to exit the stage at this point, but he later clarifies his position. In the UKFC report, the clarifications (if there were to be any) are missing, the examples of disgruntled filmmakers seem vindictive and unreasonable.²³ Again, this points to an adversarial relationship; a difference in values and perspectives. For example, there is a distinction between approaches and outcomes. While Connors says that the awards and prizes *were* their approach, some would consider them to be an outcome. It is the ends, not the means. Film development agencies want to achieve such awards, but through certain methods. It is this ‘approach’ that remains elusive, and hard to define. In the UKFC report the approach could simply be described as the dominant industrial paradigm. Films are merited by their ability to create employment and economic output, while working within the same practices as industry. Any deviation from this approach, either positive or negative, may struggle to gain the development agency’s support.

‘As you can see self-sabotage is my greatest quality!’

This is what makes John Connors's speech worthy of analysis. The methodological flaw of the UKFC report is that filmmakers will not necessarily report truthfully or honestly to the proverbial hand that feeds.

‘Where were we? Oh yeah, so despite the fact that I can’t get an agent to represent me and no filmmakers or casting directors will look past the fact that I am a traveller; this is still a huge moment for me.’

²¹ Beinart, Chandler, Hypponen, Kelly, and O’Shea, ‘Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK’, 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 49-50.

Connors's speech makes a sincere and meaningful point; what happens if you do not 'fit' into the dominant industrial paradigm? Grugulis and Stoyanova asserted that the structural organisation of the dominant model, specifically its reliance on hiring from existing networks instead of transparent recruitment policies, favours particular men and excludes women and minorities.²⁴ But Connors's specific situation does not extend to all low and micro-budget filmmakers. The UKFC report suggested that low and micro-budget production shared similar representation issues to mainstream cinema,²⁵ which suggests that this part of Connors's speech is particular to a specific few, rather than a wider group of filmmakers.

There is not a hidden plethora of filmmaking by marginalised groups waiting to be seen by audiences, hence a variety of schemes to help redress the lack of representation. However, Connors's speech suggests this may also have a negative effect: it is not that he is being ignored, but that others will not look past the fact that he is a traveller. Is his identity considered by others as a way to fulfil a positive diversity quota that simultaneously prevents him from being seen in other perspectives? Is he not an actor and a writer as well as a traveller? It would be interesting to explore whether schemes that promote equality have such effects. Similarly, would an equitable system in which projects were selected without knowledge of the participants favour those who already had experience of packaging projects?

Despite saying that awards are not important for him, Connors's reasons as to why it is a huge moment for him becomes apparent in the next part of his speech.

'Because seven and a half years ago I was sitting in my house in Darndale in a little box bedroom in the darkness contemplating suicide. That's no mess. I thought that there was no way out until my brother Joe reached out to me and we talked for hours. He said that I "needed something".'

Again, it is difficult to generalize Connors's specific experience to all low and micro-budget filmmakers; to do so would trivialize his circumstances. What can be compared, though, is the repeated mention of family and the imagery of the bedroom that is evoked. As mentioned earlier, the UKFC report makes no meaningful reference to wider families at all. Connors's repeated mention of family, compared to the absence in the UKFC report, suggests a significant difference in perspective.

The bedroom is mentioned twice in the UKFC report, in reference to 'bedroom' filmmaking,²⁶ an allusion to 'bedroom' musicians who record and distribute music from their own homes. The context is very different from Connors' description of a dark isolated space. There are two points at which filmmaking was vaguely identified and alluded to as a leisurely pursuit, picking up a guitar²⁷ and playing in pub band,²⁸ but both are in the context of being 'discovered', which is not strictly leisure, rather than a personal investment in a future reputation.

Here are two extreme perspectives. Not all low and micro-budget filmmakers are motivated by being 'discovered' or to avoid suicide. There are likely to be many motivations in between. However, the UKFC report does not reflect a diversity of motivations. Is this as a result of their methodology? Perhaps hobbyists or amateurs who pursue filmmaking as a leisurely pastime are omitted as the UKFC chose to only look at feature-length productions.

²⁴ Grugulis and Stoyanova, 'Social Capital and Networks', 1311–31.

²⁵ Beinart, Chandler, Hypponen, Kelly, and O'Shea, 'Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK', 15.

²⁶ Ibid. 27, 54.

²⁷ Ibid. 54.

²⁸ Ibid. 22.

But how does something like *Born of Hope: The Ring of Barahir*,²⁹ a UK feature-length, fan fiction project fit into this paradigm? The film narrowly missed the data collection sample, but was in pre-production from 2006 onwards. The film had to remain non-commercial to avoid a legal battle with the rights holders of *Lord of The Rings*, but it won Best Micro-budget Feature at the London Independent Film Festival in 2010. Is this culturally significant?

‘I needed something to latch onto, somewhere I could put this energy and he suggested acting. I don't know why but it was just a lightbulb moment and I remember coming out of my first class at the Abbey and walking down Abbey Street, and it was like walking on a cloud. I'd just discovered something. This world that I never knew existed called creativity and it saved my life. It really did.’

Connors identifies creativity as a salvation that saved his life. He says that it is a world that he never knew existed, which raises deeper questions about society's relationship to creativity and whether perceptions vary across different groups. What is clear is that Connors considers creativity to have given him a reason for living. The UKFC report does not explore whether other filmmakers engage with low and micro-budget filmmaking as a source of meaningful creative expression. It assumes that everyone is engaged for the purpose of gaining access to industry and views all productions in a capacity for economic value, regardless of whether that was the intention or not. This represents a further difference in perspective.

‘Our government is never going to do anything about the mental health crisis. Our reptilian psychopathic government, but I think creativity can definitely be a component to heal people.’

Connors switches attention from the Film Board to the Irish government, and accuses them of not doing anything about mental health in Ireland. This falls outside of the remit of this paper as the focus is on the differences between the film development agencies and the filmmaker, rather than the filmmaker and wider government. However, it is important to acknowledge the fact that Connors makes a link between mental health, creativity and government funding. In the context of his whole speech, his belittling the sense of ceremony and the pomposity of the awards, it can be assumed that he believes the emphasis of governmental spending is in the wrong place.

‘And I want to dedicate this award to my father who passed away 20 years ago this year through suicide. This is for you daddy!’

Connors ends his speech with a final dedication that contextualizes his position. Having already acknowledged his own suicidal thoughts, he pays tribute to his father, who committed suicide years before. Viewed through this prism, it is as if Connors represents an alternative narrative of what could have happened for his father had the right support been in place. It is inappropriate for this paper to revisit and reimagine his specific past. However, Connors's award win and the subsequent virality surrounding his speech indicates that he is an important voice that has previously been missing in the wider media discourse, one that may inspire others like him to pursue creativity. The question is whether they will receive support in such a search.

²⁹ Kate Madison, dir., *Born of Hope: The Ring of Barahir*, Cambridge, England: Actors at Work Productions, 2009.

Discussion

The aim is to understand whether there is a different perspective between the low and micro-budget filmmaker and the state development agency that seeks to support filmmaking. As mentioned in the methodology, it is important not to generalize a position of low and micro-budget filmmakers from a single perspective. How reliable can this methodology be at determining whether there are differing perspectives? It is possible to find examples where Connors's speech matches the UKFC report, and where examples of wider literature match his sentiments. This results in the emergence of certain themes in Connors's speech which differ in perspective from the UKFC report, and can be explored for their wider implications. First, the adversarial relationship between the agency and the filmmaker. Second, the repeated mention of family (either actual or perceived) and its absence from the UKFC report. Third, the different values of what is deemed important.

The adversarial relationship

Both Connors's speech and the UKFC report demonstrate that some filmmakers have an adversarial relationship with film development agencies. The UKFC report suggests that this is due to feeling unsupported³⁰ which can lead to the oppositional sentiment. This chimes with Connors's point about not securing funding from the Film Board. Is it only a rejection of funding that leads to this adversarial relationship? Connors implies that it was a difference in 'approach', but it nevertheless resulted in no funding. Perhaps it is the ambiguity of the language used by development agencies and the vagueness with which it is applied that creates antagonism with the filmmaker? For example; the current Screen Ireland (formally Irish Film Board) website suggests that the organization has policy values around creativity and innovation, diversity and enterprise.³¹ How can a filmmaker then feel that they were rejected because of a difference in 'approach'? Surely, by definition, a different approach is the absolute manifestation of creativity, innovation, diversity and enterprise? These policy values are in fact governed by other professional and legal parameters (such as crew structures, pay rates etc.) which limit how such terms should be interpreted, rendering the words meaningless to some. In the case of Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland, it is difficult to see how innovation, diversity or enterprise develop in a scheme where projects can only be funded if they meet all criteria outlined in the Irish Production guidelines.³² These include 'close attention to the previous work of all individuals involved (including producers, co-financiers, sales agents and distributors) taking into account their creative abilities in audio-visual media as well as their professional competence and reliability.' It is unclear how this assessment is made and how it relates to someone who would like to work differently, or with someone who does not have an established track record. What happens if your background prevented you from establishing a professional competence? What happens if you wanted to work without the traditional production role taxonomy? One limits the ability to be truly diverse, innovative or enterprising when adopting the industrial paradigm. Worse still, lip service to such policies perhaps accentuates tokenism; when someone like John Connors is valued as a traveller by directors and casting agents because he can help fill a quota, and it becomes difficult for people to see past that. The same criticisms can be levelled at development agencies in the UK. Perhaps it would be better if development agencies were to divest themselves of such buzzwords unless they can apply transparent, specific critical frameworks to their interpretation of the terms. This is not a criticism of schemes that seek to positively address issues such as gender or diversity

³⁰ Beinart, Chandler, Hypponen, Kelly, and O'Shea, 'Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK', 21.

³¹ Screen Ireland, 'Screen Ireland Vision'. Accessed 16 April 2020. <https://www.screenireland.ie/about/ifb-vision>.

³² Ibid.

imbalance within the dominant paradigm, but a criticism of how development agencies ignore the fact that such imbalances may be the *result* of such a paradigm in the first place. Where is the funding devoted to the development of alternative production paradigms? Where is such innovation and enterprise taking place? Davenport argued of UK agencies that

The basis of their policy, therefore, is not to question the existing model but to see how they might better help their members realize their aspirations within its constraints. PACT, for example, does not perceive its role as being to help producers prevail against the domination of the 'Major' studios, which it regards as not feasible. Rather, it is active in the negotiation of industry wage rates or in maintaining the television quota at 25 percent. BECTU likewise represents its members' interests without seeking to destabilize the industry model. Skillset bases its training on a hierarchical model and strives to educate producers in financial and other matters by bringing over Hollywood producers to lead seminars. Lastly, the Film Council does not challenge the domination of the US 'Majors', since it believes this to be impossible. Instead it seeks to optimize UK production within existing constraints.³³

This perspective fuels the image of the development agency as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. What is interesting is that the adversarial relationship does not seem to travel one way; the UKFC report suggests that it can be *mutual*. It would be obvious to consider some filmmakers as simply envious of the film development agencies because of their resources and privileged position. But the UKFC report suggests that the unprofessional approaches that low and micro-budget filmmakers use (long hours/low-no pay) are a threat to industry and argue that a parity of standards must be applied in order to avoid exploitation. Is there where the aims and objectives of filmmakers and development agencies collide? The filmmaker who does not qualify for funding finds other methods, which puts the project in ideological opposition to the aims and objectives of the development agency. Each party then wishes that the other did not exist because they represent part of the problem in each other's mission. How can this paradoxical situation be overcome?

The family (either actual or perceived)

Connors's speech and the wider literature^{34,35} make continued references to family (either actual or perceived) yet the UKFC report does not mention them at all. Filmmakers either require the support or encouragement of their family/ close peers or they alternatively forsake relationships to pursue filmmaking. Either way, it is an important consideration that is missing from the UKFC report. Removing filmmakers from the context of their connections and family culture contributes to the lack of diversity and gender parity. For example, people with parenting or caring responsibilities have different needs than those with none. People with relatives or friends established in the industry have different access opportunities than those who do not. To inadequately explore and examine the context of these relationships represents a failure to understand one of the most fundamental forces shaping the industry. Such an understanding is important when considering the 'approach'. If the dominant industrial model is systemically biased, then operating within such parameters extends the systemic bias.

Admittedly, schemes are developed to address some of these issues, but what are the ideological and methodological approaches to construct such schemes? Is a development opportunity that trains someone in the industry process empowering the individual or enforcing external parameters by which they must express themselves?

³³ John Davenport, 'UK Film Companies: Project-Based Organizations Lacking Entrepreneurship and Innovativeness?', *Creativity and Innovation Management* 15, no. 3 (2006): 250–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8691.2006.00394.x>, 255

³⁴ Grugulis and Stoyanova, 'Social Capital and Networks', 1311–31.

³⁵ Rowlands and Handy, 'An Addictive Environment', 657–80.

The values of what is deemed important

Connors's speech and the UKFC report both suggest that awards and recognition are what the film development agencies consider to be significant. The UKFC report assumes that low and micro-budget filmmakers are motivated by the pursuit of reaching such recognition and being discovered. Connors argues that it is the creative expression that is fundamental to him. The UKFC report does not adequately explain why so many filmmakers would pursue film in the absence of a meaningful business plan other than assuming it to be a training opportunity.³⁶ There is no mention of filmmaking as a hobby, a pastime, a pleasure or a leisure, and there is no mention of words like 'amateur' or 'fun'. This reinforces the notion that film development agencies have a limited concept of what is considered valuable. This is not to suggest that Connors is a hobbyist or amateur; but it is an acknowledgement of the mismatch between the aims and objectives of the two parties and that other interpretations may exist for other filmmakers. As Townley et al describe:

The term 'creative industries' stimulates disquiet because it evokes the contentious issue of culture's relationship to value, and more especially, the market, underscoring debates concerning culture as a public good, the transcendent role of arts and its civilizing affect and effect. Concerns are that marketization and the imperatives of the commodity form fundamentally change cultural products, cultural producers and cultural labour, constituting yet further accreditation of business and management into cultural life.³⁷

This goes towards understanding why filmmakers and development agencies may disagree on what constitutes 'cultural significance'. Menger argues

... it should be noted that the definition of art and culture has obviously been broadened as cultural policies have developed. A more relativistic view of culture has become increasingly legitimate as public support has taken into consideration the local community level and its whole apparatus (amateur activities, associations, so called sociocultural activities) by setting up links between art, culture, leisure, schooling, and social work. At the same time, one may note an opposing trend in cultural policies: the development of a discourse about culture as a real economic sector. A new form of 'cultural accountancy' has in fact emerged that seeks to quantify the economic output of public spending on culture.³⁸

This bifurcation of perspectives perhaps explains how the filmmaker comes to misunderstand a film development agency's purpose. Awards and prizes are quantifiable ways to account for the agency's impact and reason for being; hence their value.

These three themes demonstrate ways in which the perspectives differ between the low and micro-budget filmmaker and the development agencies. The fundamental question now is: *why does any of this matter?*

Conclusion

Who cares if the perspectives differ between some low and micro-budget filmmakers and the development agencies? Is it important? To some extent, it is not important. For as long as someone is refused funding by a development agency, there will presumably be a difference in perspective. The differences for some may be a positive contributor to their motivation, creativity and/or their identity. Up to a point, Connors would fulfil the criteria of the UKFC's third category of low and micro-budget filmmakers: the disgruntled and/or unsupported.

³⁶ Beinart, Chandler, Hypponen, Kelly, and O'Shea, 'Low and Micro-Budget Film Production in the UK', 21

³⁷ Barbara Townley, Nic Beech and Alan Mckinlay, 'Managing in the Creative Industries: Managing the Motley Crew', *Human Relations* 62, no. 7 (2009): 939–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726709335542>. 940

³⁸ Menger, 'Artistic Labor Markets and Careers', 542.

However, his points about acting saving his life and the fact that awards are not important to him suggest there is a missing fourth category: one where filmmakers engage in film for reasons other than the main paradigm.

The adversarial position may emerge as a result of rejection, but also through a lack of understanding on behalf of both parties as to what the other does. Filmmakers need to realise that the development agency may have a wide-reaching set of aims and aspirations, but they are trying to achieve it through limited means. It is not their remit to support film as a creative expression to remedy mental health, as a hobby, or as research. Similarly, film development agencies should recognise that not everyone is pursuing filmmaking for discovery or awards, and they would do well to recognise the reality as such, even if they cannot support it. Development agencies may also consider the processes and terminology they use and how it may be leading to such ambiguity and a sense of rejection. Obviously, it does not benefit a film development agency when a filmmaker wins an award and goes viral on social media criticizing the agency's ability to predict box office or critical success. It arguably damages the public perception of the agency's accountability and expertise.

The lack of recognition around the wider context of filmmaking also needs to be addressed by development agencies if they wish to genuinely influence change in the industry. Connors points out that his familial circumstances and heritage have played positive and negative roles in his journey. Circumstances will differ for every individual, but for as long as development agencies only work within the constraints of the dominant paradigm, they will struggle to influence any change. To reiterate, this is not a criticism of schemes that seek to positively address issues such as gender or diversity imbalance within the dominant paradigm, but a criticism of how development agencies ignore the fact that such imbalances may be the result of such a paradigm's existence in the first place.

Recommendations

The purpose of this paper was to explore an area of filmmaking that is often neglected. Low and micro-budget filmmaking is less documented than mainstream cinema, and as such, less understood. There is a need for more research into all aspects of low and micro-budget cinema, as it is often the portal through which filmmakers will pass on the way to bigger things. Retrospectively, exploring the low and micro-budget origins of those who become popular leads to a narrative fallacy. We should explore the factors such as who gets to make films and how they make them. Where do they make them and why? I believe it is only by understanding such things that we can work on addressing the lack of diversity and gender equality in our field.

Similarly, there remains plenty of scope to explore the perspectives of other crew members in filmmaking. The focus on creative heads of departments denies us the opportunity to explore collaboration from other perspectives. Again, retrospectively exploring the career trajectory of those who become popular leads to a narrative fallacy.

The recent record levels of investment in UK creative industries contrast with a drastic reduction in the number of low and micro-budget movies made (sub £2m films were down from 295 in 2010 to 108 in 2017).³⁹ Perhaps this drop simply correlates with the closure of the UK Film Council, the changing distribution models or wider austerity. Whatever the reason,

³⁹ BFI, *BFI Commission on UK Independent Film*. Accessed 16 April 2020, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-commission-on-uk-independent-film-2018-07-18.pdf>.

low and microbudget film is in decline in the UK. While the UKFC report indicated that low and micro-budget film was little better in terms of diversity than mainstream film, it is difficult to see how less films all around helps to improve such issues. Isn't a decline in filmmaking a decline in film culture? In the same way that the UKFC was interested in understanding the boom of low and micro-budget filmmaking, we would benefit from an analysis of the bust.

To research such things also requires better methodologies. I believe the methodological weaknesses of this paper are accountable to the lack of verifiable data available. How can we develop an understanding of things that are rarely documented formally? Production studies shares similar methodological concerns, but they are exacerbated in low and micro-budget production. We need to be inventive and interdisciplinary in our approach to understanding low and micro-budget production. Venturing further, in the absence of meaningful investment from development agencies into new production models, researchers should develop research council bids to explore such topics through practice.

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